



NORMAN AJARI

DARKENING BLACKNESS

RACE, GENDER, CLASS, AND PESSIMISM
IN 21ST CENTURY BLACK THOUGHT

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Pessimism in 21st-Century
Black Thought

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Translated by Matthew B. Smith

polity

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Introduction

Centrality and Erasure of Black Pessimism

A specter haunts the Western university: the specter of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Politicians and pundits of both old Europe and the New World have formed a holy alliance to ward off this specter. President Trump and President Macron, Fox News and *Le Monde*, French republicans and conservative Brits agree on its danger. Everywhere, CRT has been deemed a public enemy, charged with corrupting our youth and derailing the pursuit of knowledge. In an increasing number of places throughout the Western world, a concerted and unrelenting attack is being led against scholars whose research deals with race.

Critical Race Theory as Public Enemy

The reaction against CRT has been the most spectacular in the United States: on September 4, 2020, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought, issued a memorandum vilifying racial sensitivity workshops that “trained” government workers “to believe divisive, anti-American propaganda.”¹ Following President Trump’s time in office, this conservative lawyer founded the Center for Renewing America,

a think tank whose primary aim is to fight against “radical philosophy, rooted in Marxism, known as Critical Race Theory,” arguing that “where Karl Marx separated society into the capitalist bourgeoisie and the oppressed proletariat, adherents of Critical Race Theory have substituted race for Marx’s class and economic distinctions.” Hence, they must put a stop to “state sanctioned racism by progressive ideologues,” whose intention is “to corrupt children and future generations into both self-loathing and hatred toward their fellow countrymen.”²

But, before becoming a citizen activist after his party was voted out of office, Vought had managed to convince the head of state of the merits of his crusade. On September 22, 2020, President Trump issued an executive order prohibiting all federal contractors from conducting trainings that address race and gender. The aim of the order was to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.”³ As is often the case in North America, religious crusades had laid the groundwork for this political directive. Already in 2019, at the conclusion of its annual meeting, the Southern Baptist Convention had issued a more measured, yet no less firm, condemnation of CRT. Meeting resistance within its ranks, particularly from African American pastors and congregants, the largest Protestant congregation in the United States has since hardened its stance on the issue.

In March 2021, a few months after taking office, President Joe Biden rescinded his predecessor’s executive order, but the definition of CRT as a pernicious effort to corrupt youth had already become a central talking point of conservative discourse in the United States. In states such as North Carolina, Idaho, and Rhode Island, Republican governors took measures to ban CRT from the curricula of public schools: “The federal government has also been targeted. In May [2021],

about 30 Republican elected officials in the House of Representatives introduced a bill, explicitly titled the Stop CRT Act, to ban ‘racial equality and diversity training’ for federal employees.”⁴ In a country that has given pride of place to the right of free speech in its most sacred text – it is right there in the first article of the Bill of Rights – these bans had to resort to a rhetoric of exception: the CRT was thus equated with totalitarian speech, making its exclusion from the public arena a matter of national security.

In October 2020, a month after Trump’s executive order was issued, British conservatives followed suit. After a debate on Black History Month, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Equalities, Kemi Badenoch, stated that “any school which teaches these elements of critical race theory, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law.”⁵ CRT is well established in the US academy where it originated, although it is not nearly as ubiquitous as the number and prominence of its critics would suggest. Before teaching Black Studies at Edinburgh, I had been recruited in 2019 by Villanova’s philosophy department to hold an assistant professor position in Critical Race Theory. In the UK, on the other hand, the discipline occupies a more marginal place, although, as the sociologist of education Paul Warmington has pointed out, the UK has a strong tradition of Black intellectuals whose legacy falls easily in line with the CRT project. Warmington hopes, in the spirit of Pan-Africanism, that the American school and the British school will come together to breed a new generation of Black public intellectuals.⁶ This is precisely what the conservative government is trying to prevent – as seen with Kemi Badenoch’s pre-emptive strikes – at a time when the murder of George Floyd has incited Black people in the UK to revolt and speak

out, driving tens of thousands of demonstrators into the streets.

In France, attacks on race studies were launched on their own terms, and didn't wait for Trump's orders to gain considerable traction in the press – though international conservative solidarity undeniably bolstered this hostility as soon as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson appeared unexpectedly as allies. In January 2018, the far-right monthly *Causeur* published an issue titled "Toulouse 2: the university colonized by *indigénistes*." In French mediaspeak, *indigénisme*⁷ refers to the political program of the radical anti-racist organization Indigènes de la République; it would hence become one of the code names of a French-styled CRT, used pejoratively alongside other neologisms such as *décolonialisme* or *racialisme*. In the French pamphleteer tradition, the mere addition of the suffix *-ism* is thought to make a term instantly reproachable. This issue of *Causeur* may not have been the first of its kind, but it stands out clearly to me for personal reasons. At the time I was teaching at the University of Toulouse, my alma mater, and one of the articles singled me out as one of the university's "colonizers." The article made no effort to hide its white supremacist political agenda. If there were any doubt, one need only glance at the racist caricatures from another article by the same author in the same issue: "It's a cliché but it's true: the individual doesn't exist in African culture, only the group, which subsumes the identity of each individual. It makes sense, then, that philosophy that teaches people 'to think for themselves' is seen as a threat."⁸ Seeing, to her dismay, that the philosophy department at the University of Toulouse was holding colloquia and offering courses where Africans and Afrodescendants were making a point of thinking for themselves, this journalist's first reflex was to call for a stop to what she thought was impossible. In fact, she was the one who viewed the act

of thinking – especially when coming from Black people – as a threat. In her own intellectual bubble, thank God, she is safe.

By the end of 2018, the fear of race studies had infected the main media outlets of the right, the center, and the left. A highly publicized op-ed entitled “‘Decolonialism’: a hegemonic strategy,” signed by 80 intellectuals, appeared at the end of November in the conservative weekly *Le Point*. The same week, the center left weekly *L’Obs* published an in-depth investigation with the headline “Universities besieged by the ‘decolonialists’.” In December 2018, in *Libération*, a reputedly left-wing daily, the influential columnist Laurent Joffrin penned an op-ed with the title “The racialized left.” The question of race had visibly brought the far right and the left together in what they took to be an affront on their shared values. Since then, this kind of “reporting,” along with a wide array of think pieces, became de rigueur in the French press, commanding an increasing amount of space in the newspapers. The inevitable spread of this discourse ended up reaching the executive power. In June 2020, speaking with *Le Monde*, President Macron took issue with French academics guilty of “dividing the Republic.”⁹ The Trump effect was in full force in February 2021 when Frédérique Vidal, the Minister of Higher Education, deploring what she saw as a mix of Chairman Mao and Ayatollah Khomeini among French scholars, used her position to authorize an investigation into “Islamoleftism” within the French academy.

This book examines the pessimism of contemporary African American theory. For it is precisely this, its pessimism, that provokes the most outspoken and vehement critiques of this academic discourse in the press and political arena. This is what is behind the attempts to ban CRT. As Reverend Michael Wilhite, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Newtonville,

Indiana, put it: “It’s just the opposite of the gospel. Under critical race theory, there is no hope. If you’re white, you’re automatically a racist because of white supremacy. But with the gospel there’s hope.”¹⁰ Both Trump’s executive order and its various iterations imposed by a handful of American states to legitimize the censorship of CRT share the same philosophy: they must combat the belief that white people and public institutions in the United States are inherently prone to racism. Similarly, journalists, columnists, and French politicians simply refuse to accept that some view the French Republic as a project devoid of future prospects for minorities. Fundamentally, the principal authors of CRT express disillusionment, disaffection, even hostility toward liberal democracy and the State. As one of its leading contemporary scholars, the African American philosopher Tommy Curry, explains:

It has come as a great surprise to whites that the Black scholars that have informed Critical Race Theory do not believe in the promises of Western democracy or the delusion that racial equality is possible in these white democratic societies. Since the nineteenth century, Black scholars have insisted upon the permanence of white racism in the U.S. and other white empires. Contrary to the academic depictions of Black American figures as hopeful and invested in the democratic experiment of America, Black thinkers insisted that anti-Blackness stains Black Americans into perpetuity. Throughout the 1800s, historic Black figures associated Black liberation with (the Haitian) revolution not incorporation in the U.S. In America and Europe, the liberal democratic ideal insists that the “race problem” between Blacks and whites will inevitably be resolved with the passing of more time. This idea of automatic progress insists that the death and dying of Black people – while constant – slowly moves white populations towards greater social consciousness and racial understanding.

This optimism regarding anti-Black racism, or the set of racial antipathies wedding Blackness and Africanity to inferiority, savagery, and disposability, depends ultimately on the ability of white democracies to manage the outrage and political dissent Black American and European populations have to their disproportionate deaths, disadvantage, and poverty compared to the white citizenry.¹¹

For critics of CRT or decolonial thought, this pro-Black pessimism, which views the State and white civil society as intrinsically unjust institutions, must be stopped before it spreads. The official narrative has it that the American and French Republics, as well as the United Kingdom, are constantly driven by reform and progress for minorities. We are told that slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and segregation are all ancient history – not that they have merely metamorphosed to preserve the structure of inequality. Any theory that frames state optimism as a vehicle for perpetuating subjugation and alienation under the banner of democracy should thus be squashed by government forces. To modify a famous quote from the South African Steve Biko, we might say the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor has become the *hope* of the oppressed. This hope blunts critiques of structural or state racism, as it interprets this racism as stages, fleeting moments, which call for reformist patience rather than radical action. But refusing to place hope in the master, the colonizer, the exploiter is what allows one to regain confidence in one's own dignity and strength. All three great imperial nations share the fear that Black people, and other people of color, will stop seeing them as places of progress toward justice, equality, and tolerance, and instead come to recognize them as state regimes fundamentally defined by a dehumanizing racism.

Pessimism as the Cornerstone of the Black Radical Tradition

This book focuses on two contemporary currents within African American thought: Afropessimism and Black Male Studies. Although they offer novel concepts and interpretations, they both return to a classical orientation within the history of Afro-diasporic thought. I began by discussing the attacks on CRT and decolonial thought in the US, France, and Britain in recent years. A parallel can be drawn between these attacks and those on Afropessimism and Black Male Studies in some academic and activist circles. The latter attacks accuse these currents of sowing distrust of institutions from countries once tied to Black slavery, of casting doubt on the benefits or promises these institutions purport to offer us, or of engendering a Black separatism that is by necessity toxic and patriarchal.

Behind these accusations is the belief that Afropessimism and Black Male Studies mark a departure from – or even are a betrayal of – Black political thought. These criticisms follow a consistent pattern. Over the past 30 years, the struggles, ideas, and achievements of the Black radical tradition have been subjected to a historical revisionism in accordance with the political sensibilities of an era from which the Black Power Movement has all but vanished. This is symptomatic of the collective neglect of the history of Black liberation politics and theories, which can be seen within Black Studies itself. To be sure, the works of Black writers such as Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, David Marriott, or Tommy Curry began appearing only over the last 20 years or so, but their works fall squarely in line with an essential component of Black radical thought since at least the Haitian Revolution – namely, that of Black pessimism. I am using this matter-of-fact designation to

refer to the idea that racism or anti-Blackness are pillars of both white states and white civil societies. It follows that Black liberation requires breaking free from these structures – a step which is often conceived as the first to take to lead to their abolishment. As opposed to an integrationist or reformist approach, Black pessimists see anti-Blackness as intrinsic to modern European civilization – not as a contingent ideological apparatus in the service of capitalist exploitation or other forms of social violence.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the victorious general of the Haitian Revolution, is without doubt one of the first great figures of this Black pessimism. He was convinced that the best way to unite all Haitians of African descent, whether they were previously free or slaves, was to take revenge against the French and engage in an endless fight. As he declared on April 28, 1804:

At last the hour of vengeance has struck, and the implacable enemies of human rights have suffered punishment for their crimes. ... I saw two classes of men born to love each other, to help each other, which blended together and became almost indistinguishable, driven by vengeance to strike, with honor, the first blows. Blacks and yellows [i.e. mulattoes], long divided by the wily duplicity of the Europeans, you who today are but one whole, one family, have no doubt, your perfect reconciliation needed to be sealed with the blood of our executioners.¹²

Dessalines's logic was a radical reversal of the logic of the Haitian colonial system, which, as Baron de Vastey explained, was based on white domination and the massacre or enslavement of Blacks.¹³

Reversal here shouldn't be confused with a simple vendetta. What Dessalines was after was a more profound, *ontological* upheaval. Under slavery, whites defined their humanity against Black slaves and

mulattoes. The latter were seen as a vile and worthless mass that threw into relief, by way of contrast, white supremacy. Shipload after shipload of Black bodies were needed to provide the colony not only with a new labor force, but with the raw material for white self-assertion. With the reversal led by Dessalines, Blacks rose to the foreground. To form and unite the Black community in Haiti – that is, to humanize collectively the former slaves and segregated people of color – the morbid relationship between whites and Blacks need not be maintained as it was during the slave era. Rather, the white gaze must simply cease to exist. The first modern Black political community has as its condition of possibility a violent withdrawal from all interaction with Europeans. This is perhaps the clearest and most radical expression of Black pessimism. And it is precisely this expression that is found in the most important Black writers of the twentieth century.

W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American thinker praised for his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a case in point. Although he is generally understood as fully committed to the American democratic ideal, as someone who believed the destiny of Black people is to find their place within, and contribute to, this ideal, it is often forgotten that, in the 1930s, he later rejected this idealization of African Americans as torchbearers of European political ambitions. Indeed, he became increasingly skeptical of the supposed virtues of integrationism, which led him to leave the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), a major organization behind the Civil Rights struggle which he had helped to found. In an article published in *The Crisis* in 1933, he wrote: “There seems no hope that America in our day will yield in its color or race hatred any substantial ground and we have no physical nor economic power, nor any alliance with other social or economic classes that will force compliance with decent civilized ideals in

Church, State, industry or art.”¹⁴ Even going so far as to reverse his negative stance against Marcus Garvey, Du Bois now saw the construction of political autonomy and social self-determination as the path to African American liberation.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, a group of young French-speaking colonial subjects were forging an intellectual and literary avant-garde movement called Négritude that would have a profound impact on the history of Africana thought. Its driving force was the rejection of the imperial horizon of assimilation and its attendant disdain of African and West Indian cultures. The notion of Négritude appeared for the first time in 1935 in the second issue of *L'Étudiant noir*, a review for which Aimé Césaire served as lead editor. In a piece entitled “Nègrerie: racial consciousness and social revolution,” Césaire defended a Black revolutionary politics delivered from the temptation to imitate white communism and the politics of the French left: “To be revolutionary is all good and well, but insufficient for us blacks [*nègres*]; we must not be revolutionaries that just happen to be black [*noirs*], but properly revolutionary blacks [*nègres révolutionnaires*] ... For the Revolution, let us claim ownership over ourselves, towering above official white culture, looking down on the ‘intellectual rigging’ of a conqueror’s imperialism.”¹⁵ Many other political and intellectual figures could be cited to illustrate the long history of this theoretical position, since pessimism regarding the emancipatory promises of white institutions runs through Black radical activism and political philosophy. For more than two centuries, the Black movement has not defined itself through its pursuit of allies and partnerships based on its shared interests with other social groups. Although this is how it is often presented today, the Black movement has thrived by constantly affirming Black specificity while pursuing autonomy, even sovereignty.

However, a shift did occur in the theoretical and political discourse on Blackness. In his 1984 book *The Myth of Black Progress*, African American sociologist Alphonso Pinkney expressed concern over the coincidence of an increasingly pervasive discourse of optimism regarding the Black condition throughout the United States and the dismantling of Black radical political activism of the 1960s and 1970s: "There appears to be, on the part of some social scientists, a curious need to convey the impression that American society is a progressive one on matters of human rights for black people. Distorted statistics and erroneous data are often used to support this myth. Yet there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary."¹⁶ In recent decades, intersectional feminism as well as certain liberal trends within Africana philosophy have been important vectors for the spread of this myth within the academy. These same forces have served to undermine the centrality of Black pessimism to our intellectual and political history.

The way the Black radical tradition, Pan-Africanism, and Black nationalism have been re-interpreted in the field of African American political philosophy over the past 20 years is telling. For the African American philosopher Tommie Shelby, unless these can be married to the sort of political liberalism championed by John Rawls, they are irrelevant to our present moment.¹⁷ Although his thinking diverges from that of Shelby's on some key points, especially on the place of Rawls' thinking in regard to Black nationalism and racial justice, the Jamaican philosopher Charles Mills also embraces political liberalism as the ultimate goal of Black social critique. Hence his notion of "Black radical liberalism." In recent decades, debates about Black nationalism and radicalism have gradually morphed into intra-party quarrels about liberalism, as if no other political horizon were conceivable.

Black feminism had already paved the way for this dismissal of the Black radical tradition. Lambasting the patriarchal, chauvinistic, and backward nature of the Black movement, the founding figures of Black feminism – such as Michele Wallace, bell hooks, or the Combahee River Collective – staked a position more in keeping with European feminism and in line with the status quo. Adopting a generic European feminist framework while drawing on the language and identity-based posture of Black radicalism, this Black feminism created an intellectual hybrid at odds with – if not heretical to – the Black Power Movement. And Black feminism is often seen today as the culmination of the Black movement. But its most influential positions derive from a radical rejection of this legacy and an outright hostility to Black pessimism. Instead, it is a doctrine of hope, of coalition-building, crystalized today in the ubiquitous term “intersectionality.” It might be worth asking whether Black feminism is the offspring of the Black integrationists of the 1960s, such as Roy Wilkins or George Schuyler, whose hostility toward Black radical organizations knew no bounds. Ill-founded accusations of sexism directed at the Black Power Movement in the 1980s conveniently recall and reinforce accusations of racism, fascism, and even Black Hitlerism made by Wilkins and Schuyler 20 years earlier.

Black thought in recent decades has been defined in large part by this suppression of its own history, opting instead for an ill-considered place within liberal ideology where the question of Black self-determination cannot even be posed, much less pursued. Since the 1980s, the Black radical tradition has virtually been at a standstill, with the theory and politics of Black Power all but abandoned. Compare this to Marxism, which, despite being marginalized for a time after the fall of the Soviet Union, has continued to be at the center of discussions and debates, adapting to the challenges

of the time. Amid this grim setting, Black Male Studies and Afropessimism have emerged like the return of the repressed. After the Black movements of the twentieth century suffered the trauma of state repression, Black thought sought refuge on the safer shores of liberalism and intersectionality. However, now that questions of mass incarceration, police violence, crippling debt, or social precarity are more relevant to Black communities than ever before, the dominant forms of African American critical theory have proven less equipped to address these matters than various strands of Black pessimism of the last century. The resurgence of these arguments restores a forgotten continuity. This book explores the re-emergence of this long-neglected theoretical space and describes its potential for illuminating a set of problems with newfound relevance.

Often caricatured as backward-looking, chauvinistic, misogynistic, or reactionary, theories informed by Black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, or Black radicalism have gradually lost ground to more liberal discourses that align closely with the dominant trends of the preponderantly white humanities. But these major currents of twentieth-century Black thought are re-emerging in a new form, with new insights and emotional registers. Pessimism, once a mere feature of Black radicalism, is now core to its approach. This pessimism has never been directed at Black people – their qualities, their courage – but rather at white society’s ability to overcome its own anti-Black hatred. Hence the recourse, throughout the twentieth century, to projects such as the return to Africa or the founding of a Black nation in North America, among others. According to the philosopher Cornel West:

the pessimism on which black nationalism was predicated was never fully embraced in an organizational sense. Black people usually still maintain some

possibility for a multiracial coalition, for trying to extend the scope of democracy in America. I think the role of the black church has been crucial in this, because what it has done historically is steal the thunder from black nationalism. It highlights black cultural distinctiveness and, despite calling for group cohesiveness, its message is universalistic.¹⁸

To be sure, the history of Black nationalism and the Black church cannot be disentangled. Henry M. Turner, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was one of the strongest advocates of the return to Africa solution in the late nineteenth century, but he had few followers.¹⁹ Despite some recent attempts to frame its discourse in more radical terms, as did Black liberation theology in the 1960s, the Black church has largely become a powerful instrument in maintaining the status quo. Its theology of prosperity that sanctifies personal enrichment and a life of luxury, its social conservatism, and its embrace of establishment politics underlie its universalist message. While the political ambitions of Bishop Turner are absent from contemporary debates, the distrust of institutions remains strong, and there has been an erosion of faith in the supposed benefits of a multiracial coalition. In the African American context, optimism and pessimism are generally a function of one's feelings about the possibility of assimilation in a predominantly white society. Often, the optimists are considered liberal, and the pessimists radical. In other words, optimists believe Black people may see their humanity fully recognized, whereas the pessimists consider anti-Blackness to be a cornerstone of the current world order. For the latter, anti-Blackness can only be defeated by overthrowing this world order. Hence the urgency of reimagining Black thought and society from the ground up. As an intellectual history-in-the-moment, *Darkening Blackness* documents this